Roots of Molestation of Boys?

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Abstract Adults of monkey and ape species often examine and fondle the penis and scrotum of youngsters. In the past, tribal societies in hot climates routinely wore little clothing so that the genitalia of boys were commonly exposed and unremarked. Diapers were unknown. By contrast, in Western societies genitalia must always be covered, and unethical adults can traumatize boys to the point of their suicide by in secret manipulating these genitalia. The cause of this negative reaction seems to be related to the tension involved in toilet-training toddlers. Parents are usually anxious to hurry the process, in the past to reduce the laundry of cloth diapers and presently to enrol the child in day care programs that refuse to admit children in diapers. Coercive toilet-training may cause irrational fears in boys, some of whom continue to wet their beds as adults. Western insistence that genitalia must be private, never public, may instil in boys that privacy means dirty as well, and too shameful to talk about to their parents or guardians.

Keywords Male Genitalia, Penis, Toilet-Training, Diaper, Molestation

1. Introduction

Child molestation is “one of the major social problems in our society today,” *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior* notes (Janus & Janus, 1993). In the survey of a cross-section sample of 2,765 American men and women, 11% of the men had been molested as boys. Judith Levine (2002) estimates that the primary erotic focus of about one percent of Americans is prepubescent children. Sexual molestation tends to be psychologically upsetting to youth, sometimes driving them to drug or alcohol abuse, to crime or even to suicide. A boy molested may become a molester in turn; there is a North American Man/ Boy Love Association whose activities and membership are secret to prevent infiltration by police (see Wikipedia).

Not only the horror, but the puzzlement of such molestation has troubled me for years. How can it be fitted into evolutionary theory? Why can the fondling of a boy's genitalia be so upsetting to him that it may destroy his life. (This article does not address the equally horrifying and

more common molestation of girls, which could be argued to have an evolutionary rationale.)

As a biologist, while writing a book on human evolution (Dagg and Harding, 2012), I came across many descriptions in the literature of monkeys and apes who routinely caressed the penis and/or scrotum of infants in their group who reacted comfortably with the experience. When I read in anthropology books about tribal societies living in hot climates, the adults wore little clothing and the boys too had no hangups about their genitalia. However, in Western societies there is great public unease with genitalia which must always be covered up in public. This disjunction of ease vs dis-ease in respect to genitalia has troubled me for years: What could have caused it?

2. Nonchalant Monkeys and Apes

In the non-human animal world, rape is exceedingly rare (Dagg, 2005) and the fondling of a baby's penis is never stigmatized as the following examples indicate:

- ** Adult male bonnet macaques “spend much time handling and looking at the infant male's scrotum and penis,” (but if it is a female they quickly lose interest in the much less conspicuous vulva and vagina) (Simonds, 1974, 155).
- ** Male stumptail macaques often sit by and play with babies, their attention often focused on an infant's penis and/or scrotum (Estrada, 1984).
- ** A female bonobo shows great interest in a friend's infant, stimulating his genitalia with a finger (de Waal, 1997, 100).
- ** Tibetan macaque males often scoop up a young male and hold him between them, one sucking the infant's penis which the other also touches (Ogawa, 2006).
- ** Male Barbary macaques like to sweep up and hold new infants, cuddling and nuzzling a baby in their arms; if it is a boy, they smell and manipulate the tiny penis at length (Whitten, 1986).

3. Early Behavior of Tribal Peoples

Tribal peoples can be similarly nonchalant about penises

which are obviously just another body part like an arm or a leg. Early anthropologists who have observed tribes living in warm climates all describe a similar relaxed attitude toward genitalia: Mundurucú Indians (Murphy & Murphy, 1985) and Yanomamo Indians (Tierney, 2000) in Brazil; Ik males in Kenya (Turnbull, 1972); !Kung people in Botswana (Shostak, 1983); Tikopians in Polynesia (Firth, 1983) and New Guineans (Schneebaum, 1988). All of the young children in these cultures wore no clothes at all, slept in small family huts so were early witnesses to copulation by their parents, and defecated and urinated in bush areas just as did the adults. The adults wore few or no clothes either, although sometimes males in Brazil wore their penises in a special sheath or tied up to a belt string. In some tribes easy homosexuality by men of all ages has been described (Tierney, 2000; Schneebaum, 1988) and it may have been present in many more but not depicted because of Western sensibilities. Even in cold climates diapers were not used by early tribal peoples. Inuit women, for example, simply removed their baby from their bare back when they felt it squirm and held the child near the ground where it could urinate and/or defecate. Modern sensibilities proscribe that genitalia not be mentioned nor seen in polite society. Why the cultural difference? I suggest it can be the trauma of too high-pressure toilet training of infants carried out when they are at a sensitive stage of their lives.

4. Tensions Related to Toilet Training

Human babies in the West always wear diapers at the very least, and usually other clothing as well. For their parents, toilet-training is a big deal conferring as it does pride in their parenting skills; no longer having to buy and wash diapers or use diaper services; greater ease for family travel; and the possible acceptance of their child into day care. The issue is so great that in March 2013, Google had 24.2 million hits re “toilet training”, and Google Scholar 162,000 hits. All too often, however, toilet training does not go as smoothly as parents would wish. Although the advantages of success are great for both parents and child, all may be devastated if the process does not go well, as discussed by popular toilet-training books (Brazelton and Sparrow, 2004; Lansky, 2002; Sonna, 2005).

Fifty-five years ago, before disposable diapers became widely used, mothers were anxious to have a child toilet trained as soon as possible because the washing, drying, folding and storage of cloth diapers was an onerous job (Spock, 1959). (I know, because I raised three children on cloth diapers.) Today, the urge to hurry toilet training is especially imperative because most day-care centers will not enroll children who are still in diapers. Frustrated parents may make the toilet training experience a repulsive one, with repeated threats, confinements, corporal punishments, deprivation punishments and other aversive controls. Indeed, the small boy and his parents may inadvertently enter into a spiraling downward battle for control of their interactions,

with the child purposely soiling his pants, smearing his stools, or throwing tantrums which cause parents to back away and thus become inconsistent in their enforcement, a dynamic known as “a coercive control strategy” (Patterson, 1982). The boy may be so perturbed that he develops irrational fears and ingrained negative habits; this is especially true if he regresses in his accomplishments because of such things as a separation, a new baby, or a death in the family. He may need psychological or psychiatric help to overcome his resistance to toilet training.

Bed-wetting is particularly upsetting to parents and young boys because it can continue for years, exacerbated by the rigid and coercive tactics of parents. In 1943 during World War II, 277 male British soldiers were treated for nocturnal enuresis which they had suffered since childhood; the causes in general were deemed to be psychological, triggered by such traumata as domestic difficulties at home, separation or death of parents, sexual anxiety, accidents or operations, and air raids during childhoods (Backus and Mansell, 1944).

5. Reflection

What is the difference between early tribal peoples living a simple life and those of us today in complex developed countries? The contrast highlighted here is the easy acceptance of genitalia and their functioning among the tribal societies compared to that in Western countries. The primary reason suggested here is the psychological trauma caused to some boys because of the stress of their past toilet-training. If a man fondles an American boy’s penis, the lad may be so upset that he is unable to tell anyone of this molestation because of the shame involved. Were such a thing to happen to a tribal boy, one thinks he might resist or he might not, but the resistance would not be because he was too afraid to tell anyone; it would be because he did not wish to be involved with the man and would say so.

Added and connected to the reality of a Western boy’s distress, is the cultural shame and secrecy present in all Western countries about sexual matters, especially as they affect youth. Most parents are reticent about talking about sexual realities with their children. They usually do not tell their children what to do should they be molested, even though their boys are daily exposed to far more men than are tribal boys. Adults do, however, in a general way teach toddlers that their genitalia are private, must be kept covered, and should not be seen or touched by anyone but themselves. But children often pick up the message because of these strictures that their private parts are not only private, but dirty and shameful as well; why else would they need to be treated in such a secretive way?

6. Evolutionary Conclusion

Presumably our ancestors shared with our closest relatives, chimpanzees and bonobos, at least two behaviors because

they make evolutionary sense. First, the interest of adults in new-born youngsters born into their group is often epitomized by the fondling of their genitalia in a gentle bonding way by their elders. Second, because rape is almost non-existent in non-human species, it does not wreak violence and chaos within a group. Human beings, like other higher primates, have evolved to be accepting of their genitalia as just another body part. Our Western culture has developed beyond this evolutionary trait, however, an overlay of self-consciousness about sexual organs that could result in sexual assault.

Molestation of boys will continue unless something is done to stop it. One probable way is to ensure that toilet training is never a traumatic event for an infant boy. A second is that the children feel free to talk with his parents about sex, and therefore able to complain immediately if an adult takes advantage of him. Our children should be self-possessed like tribal boys, and never ashamed of their genitalia.

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